

In this session, we will begin looking at the main body of the Book of Judges. This portion of the book is composed of Judges 3.7-16.31 and has been identified by several different names: The Seven Cycles, The Twelve Judges, The Deliverers, and others. This portion of the book is a development of the themes found in Judges 2.6-3.6. Before we start, it might be helpful to understand what we will find as we move through this part of Judges.

We need to bear in mind that the writer of Judges has specifically selected certain historical events to support his overall theme of the Canaanization of Israel in its daily life, in its morality and most important in its spirituality. We will look at seven cycles of sin and oppression, deliverance and rest. This sevenfold cycle serves to reinforce the idea of the Israel's downward spiral into spiritual collapse. For the writer of Judges, the cycles of disaster that are experienced by Israel are a fulfillment of the "covenant curses" of Leviticus 26.

The writer has arranged the material in logical sequence to support his contention of Israel's progressive downward spiritual spiral. We will see this not only in the lives of the people but particularly in the lives of the "judges." Twelve judges are mentioned but only seven judges and thus seven cycles are detailed. The structure of each cycle is basically the same and is drawn from 2.11-23. In general, each cycle will have 5 basic parts: The sin; the oppression; Israel's cry; the deliverance; and the rest. These parts are not present in every narrative cycle. The Shamgar cycle is unlike any of the other accounts in that the writer does not include any of the mentioned parts of the cycle with it. Of the remaining six cycles the first, the Othniel cycle is the most complete and the last, the Samson cycle the most incomplete. This is another literary tool used by the writer to convey Israel's further downward spiral and separation from Yahweh. Finally, as you read these cycles pay particular attention to see which part of the cycle that the writer is emphasizing. With each cycle, the writer will select a part of the cycle for fuller elaboration. It is a literary tool designed to maintain the reader's interest.

Let's look at the first cycle.

First Cycle: Othniel 3:7-11

1. Sin: 3.7 - "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord" is from 2:11 and occurs six times at the beginning of narrative cycles (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). Commentator Daniel Block suggests that the writer of Judges "interprets all of Israel's premonarchic experiences through the theological lens created by Moses in Deuteronomy." One thing is clear, that the writer of Judges was familiar with Deuteronomy and Moses' writings had a profound affect upon the way he understood that history of Judges.

The first cycle begins with the negative fact: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." The evil that Israel did was they "forgot the Lord their God" and they

“served the Baals and the Asherahs.” The evil of Israel was that they abandoned Yahweh and chose to “serve” wood and stone rather than the living God.

2. Oppression: 3.8 - The writer begins with the reason of Israel's oppression, the Yahweh's attitude towards Israel: “Therefore the anger of the Lord burned against Israel.” Then came the result: and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia: The name, Cushan-rishathaim, means “doubly-wicked Cushan.” This title was probably given to him by Israel on account of their experience with him. The name Cushan itself implies that he was a Cushite, a Mesopotamian one.

As for the identity of Cushan, there were two groups of Cushites: Mesopotamian and Ethiopian. The name Cushan corresponds to the ancient Kassites, mentioned in ancient documents, which overran Babylon and ruled for four centuries, until the twelfth century BC. Two of the Kassite kings had the name of Kashtiliash, a name that very closely corresponds to the name here in the Hebrew text.

As for Cushan's king's domain, the Hebrew name for Mesopotamia is Aram Naharayim, literally, “Syria of the Two Rivers,” and it refers to the very fertile land that lies between the Orontes River and the Euphrates River. More specifically, it refers to the fertile land east of the Orontes River, covering the upper and middle Euphrates, and lands watered by the Habur and the Tigris Rivers. Only after the fourth century BC was the name Aram Naharayim used for the whole Tigris-Euphrates River or valley. Before that, it was limited to that portion just described. The duration of the oppression under Cushan was: and the children of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

It is interesting to note that this oppressor was the most powerful of all of the oppressors to be named in Judges. Block comments: “This means that the first oppressor of Israel sent in by Yahweh was not simply the leader of an alliance of Canaanite city-states (Jabin, 4.2), the recently arrived Philistines (cf. 3.31; 10.67), the migratory Midianites (6.2-3), or the emerging nations of Moab (Eglon, 3.12) and Ammon (10.6-7, 17; 11:1-33), beyond the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. He was the most powerful of all the enemies of Israel named in the book. For him to have extended his tentacles as far as Judah in southern Canaan meant he was a world-class emperor, who held Canaan in his grip for at least eight years.”

3. Israel's Cry: 3.9a - It took eight years before Israel realized that continuing to worship Baal and Asherah was of no benefit to them and would not free them from the oppression.

4. Deliverance: 3.9b-10 - The Hebrew word for savior or deliverer is moshia, a word used in three different ways. In the Book of Judges, it is used of heroic men who save the nation in time of war. They were saviors, deliverers, because they

saved the nation in times of war. Second, moshia is used of God (Isa. 43:11; 45:15 and 45:21). And finally, it was also used by Isaiah of the Messiah in Isaiah 19:20. The name of the savior-judge here was: Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

Othniel's ability to be a savior was the result of the Spirit of Yahweh, which came upon him. This phrase is used several times in this book (6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 14:19, and 15:14). It is always used in the context of being empowered to accomplish a specific task or mission. The result of Othniel's empowerment and mission was twofold. First, he judged Israel; and second, and he went out to war, and Yahweh delivered Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand: and his hand prevailed against Cushan-rishathaim.

5. Rest: 3.11 - The rest lasted just about a generation. What is obvious is that the repentance of the generation failed to transmit to the next generation. Only once did peace last for eighty years, and in that instance, the peace extended for two generations. Otherwise, peace lasted for either forty years or even less: in 3.11, forty years; 3.30, eighty years; 5.31, forty years; 8.28, forty years; 10.2-3, forty-five years; 12.7-14, thirty-one years; and 16.31, twenty years.

The cycle ends with death: And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

This first cycle establishes the pattern for a series of "six accounts of divine punishment and deliverance by the hands of a specially chosen human agent." When Israel abandoned Yahweh in favor of the Canaanite gods, they absolved God of any obligation to them. It was even worse than that, they made an enemy of Yahweh and subjected themselves to His judgment. Contrast that with the individual, called by God into his service, who is will to challenge the forces of evil and darkness in Yahweh's power. Who could stand against God and those dedicated to His service? Is this the only hope that we have in the church today? Block tells us that: "In the words of Yahweh himself, through his prophet Zechariah, 'victories are won--not by might or by power, but by my Spirit' (Zech 4:6)."

Second Cycle: Ehud: 3.12-30. In this section the writer effectively uses a variety of literary tools to make fun of the Moabites and give glory to Yahweh.

1. Sin: 3.12a

2. Oppression: Eglon of Moab 3.12b-14 - Verse 12b introduces Israel's new oppressor: And Yahweh strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel. It was God who energized Eglon to be the oppressor against Israel even though they were His people. The reason was: because they had done that which was evil in the sight of Yahweh. Remember that Yahweh was going to use the people of the land, the Canaanites to test Israel, yet here we find Israel being tested the Moabites, who were related to Israel through Abraham's nephew Lot (Ge 19.36-

37). Earlier Yahweh had prevented Israel from enter the land of Moab, but here He brings the Moabites into the land of Israel because of the evil that Israel had done. Verse 13a lists the allies of Eglon, Ammon and Amalek. Verse 13b records the conquest of Israel, and the fact the Moab took possession of the city of palm-trees, a reference to Jericho (1.16). Jericho had been destroyed by Joshua about sixty years earlier, and had been rebuilt, but not as a fortified city, and therefore it did not violate the curse of Joshua (Joshua 6.26). Verse 14 tells us that the duration of the oppression by Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

3. Israel's Cry: 3.15a is not a cry of repentance but simply a cry of pain.

4. Deliverance: 3.15b-29 Israel's deliverance came in two stages. First the assassination of Eglon 3.15b-26.

Verse 15b introduces the savior Yahweh raised up for Israel, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite. He is described as a man left-handed. The Hebrew literally reads, "a man bound in his right hand," because he was only able to freely use his left hand. This idiom is used only here and in Judges 20:16, which makes the same point about the Benjamites being left-handed and notes left-handedness seemed to be rather common among the Benjamites, which is rather ironic, since the name itself means "the son of my right hand." According to 1 Chronicles 12:2, the Benjamites were also known to be ambidextrous. So, they tended to be left-handed and often ambidextrous as well, good in both hands. The advantage to Ehud is that he would bind his dagger on the opposite side to that on which it was usually carried, therefore concealing the weapon. They would have searched the left side rather than the right side, which is where they would have expected the sword or knife to be. The verse concludes by providing the occasion for deliverance: and the children of Israel sent tribute by him unto Eglon the king of Moab.

Judges 3:16 describes the dagger-sword: And Ehud made him a sword, which had two edges, a cubit in length. If cubit is correct, it would be about eighteen inches long. The Hebrew word is gomed, which is a hapax legomenon, meaning it is a term used only here and nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. A gomed would be about a foot long. This dagger was without a cross-shaft, which is why it would disappear into the fat of the body. Then the text describes Ehud's concealment of the weapon: and he girded it under his raiment upon his right thigh.

Verses 17 to 18 describe Ehud's occasion for deliverance: And he offered the tribute unto Eglon king of Moab. Three things should be noted here. First, the occasion of paying tribute provided the timing. In such circumstances, seeing strangers in the palace would not be abnormal. Second, the text notes that now Eglon was a very fat man, which provides the explanation for the account that follows. Third, the text states, And when he had made an end of offering the

tribute, he sent away the people that bore the tribute. All the other tribute-bearers were sent back to their homes, leaving Ehud alone to carry out his plan.

Verses 19- 22 give the details of the assassination. Verse 19 deals with the return of Ehud: But he himself turned back from the quarries that were by Gilgal. The Hebrew word for quarries is psillim, which means, 'sculptured statues.' In this case, they were sculptured statues of Canaanite gods, which illustrates the spiritual problem that Israel had, and why the servitude came in the first place. These sculptured statues of Canaanite gods were in Gilgal, which means they were erected in the very same place where Joshua erected the memorial stones in honor of what the true God had done for Israel. They were also erected in the place from whence the Angel of Yahweh had already departed, and may have been the cause of His departure from Gilgal. Ehud, after leaving Jericho, went as far as Gilgal, and then returned. Then comes the trap: and [he] said, I have a secret errand unto you, O king. The king responded: And he said, Keep silence. Obviously believing Ehud, the king dismisses his attendants: And all that stood by him went out from him. By so doing, the king set the trap for himself.

Verse 20 describes the circumstance further: and he [Eglon] was sitting by himself alone in the cool upper room. The Hebrew is aliyah, and literally reads "the upper chamber of cooling." This was the higher room that would allow the cool afternoon breezes to come through. This would have been a one-room apartment built on the corner of a flat roof, fitted on all sides with latticed windows, which shut out the sun in the heat of the day, but allowed for free ventilation during the cool breezes of the afternoon. So it allowed for some privacy. In the heat of the summer, it would be the coolest part of the house. This kind of upper room also tended to serve as a guest room of a private house (I Kg. 17:19 and 17:23; II Kg. 4:10-11) or as a guest room of a palace (II Kg. 1:2). Often it was a very large room (Jer. 22:13-14). When Ehud said, I have a message from God, he used the generic term Elohim, and so it is not known what exactly the king understood. However, according to rabbinic tradition, the Moabite king understood Ehud to be speaking of the God of Israel, and so he stood up as a mark of respect. As reward for this action, God gave him a daughter, Ruth, who became a mother of Jewish kings. But because of his wickedness, he also had another daughter, Orpah, who became the mother of Goliath. This is rather imaginary rabbinic exegesis, and there is no real foundation for these teachings.

Judges 3:21-22 describes the Moabite king' execution. Verse 21 details the stabbing, spelled out in three specific stages: first, And Ehud put forth his left hand; second, and took the sword from his right thigh; and third, and thrust it into his body. Then verse 22 describes what happened with the sword, also in three stages. First: and the haft also went in after the blade; since there was no cross-shaft to stop it, the whole dagger went into his body. Second: and the fat closed upon the blade; since the king was so very fat, it took in the whole sword, including the handle. Third: and it came out behind. The Hebrew word is parshedona, another hapax legomenon (word used only once in the Hebrew

Bible). In other cognate, Semitic languages, it is used of the cavity or the opening of the anus. So the downward motion of the dagger was with such force that it passed completely through the abdomen and projected from the anus. The very one whom God had earlier strengthened against Israel now became reduced to a pile of fat and excrement.

Verse 23 describes Ehud's escape: Then Ehud went forth into the porch. The Hebrew word for porch is *misderonah*, another hapax legomenon (word used only once in the Hebrew Bible), and it is not really clear what it means, but it was the way by which Ehud escaped from the palace. Before leaving, Ehud shut the doors of the upper room upon him, and locked them. The doors could be locked from the inside without a key, but not from the outside without a key. This would cause a delay in discovering the body.

Then in verses 24 to 25, the assassination is discovered. The timing was: Now when he was gone out, his servants came; and they saw, and, behold, the doors of the upper room were locked; and they said, Surely he is covering his feet in the upper chamber. To cover your feet was a euphemism for responding to the call of nature. In essence, they were saying, "He must be sitting on the toilet, and that is why everything is closed." Thus, they tarried until they were ashamed; and behold, he opened not the doors of the upper room: therefore, they took the key. The key was a flat piece of wood that was fitted with pins corresponding to the holes in a hollow bolt. The hole in the door gave access to the bolt, which was on the inside. The insertion of the key into the bolt pushed out the pins of the lock and enabled the bolt to be withdrawn from its sockets in the doorpost. The door could be locked without a key, but it could not be unlocked without a key. Having done all this, the servants opened them; and then came the discovery, and behold, their lord was fallen down dead on the earth.

Verse 26 further details Ehud's escape: And Ehud escaped while they tarried, and passed beyond the quarries, and escaped unto Seirah. This was the same route he took earlier but this time he went beyond the quarries.

The second stage of Israel's deliverance came with the defeat of Moab 3.27-29.

Verses 27 to 28a, is the call to arms, with verse 27 being the call of the trumpet-- he blew a trumpet in the hill-country of Ephraim. The Hebrew word for trumpet is *shofar*, often referring to the horn of an animal, usually a ram's horn. The geography is the hill-country of Ephraim, which included the tribal territory of Benjamin. The people of Israel recognized that it was the time to rebel against the Moabites.

In verse 28b, the Israelites also recognized Ehud's leadership. Under Ehud's leadership, they captured the fords of the Jordan which accomplished two strategic things: It prevented the enemy from escaping into their own territory on the east side of the Jordan to find sanctuary or to regroup; and it also created a

wedge within the Moabite army so that no reinforcements could come from Moab to help the army now trapped on the west bank of the Jordan.

Verse 29 summarizes the slaughter of the Moabites.

5. Rest: 3.30 - So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest eighty years. This was the longest period of rest found in the entire Book of Judges. It gave Israel another opportunity to return to Yahweh and give Him their undivided attention. The fact that the book of Judges doesn't end here would attest to Israel's failure.

It is also worth considering why there is little said about the assassination by Ehud. Is he a hero or a traitor? Is the writer condoning Ehud's treachery? Does Yahweh condone it? Did Yahweh order it? We are left with the fact that Ehud acted like a Canaanite of his day, "cleverly, opportunistically, violently, and apparently for his own glory." There is no doubt that the real hero here and throughout Judges is not the "judge" but the real deliverer, Yahweh.

Third Cycle: Shamgar 3.31 - This is one of the five cycles that is not detailed, but spells out three basic facts. The first concerns the person of Shamgar. Shamgar is a Hurrian name, used of a people known in the Bible as the Horites. The name shows Canaanite influence on the Jews. Furthermore, Shamgar was a Jew who was the son of Anath, a name dedicated to the goddess Anath. Among the Canaanite deities, Anath was the Canaanite goddess of sex and war.

The second fact is that Shamgar's action of killing six hundred Philistines with an ox-goad. It is possible that the six hundred dead Philistines may represent the total number of Philistines that Shamgar killed, and not the number as a result of a one-time battle. The Hebrew for ox-goad is *malmad*, another hapax legomenon (word used only once in the Hebrew Bible), used to urge oxen to move forward, and was as much as eight feet long. It was pointed at one end with a metal tip, and had a chisel-shaped blade on the other end for scrapping a plowshare, and so it could effectively be used in place of a spear.

The third fact concerns Shamgar's judgeship, that he also saved Israel. The word also connects Shamgar with Ehud. He is referred to as a *moshia* and not as a *shophet*: a savior, not a judge. His judgeship may have transpired after Ehud's deliverance, but before Ehud's death, which is why the historical notation in Judges 4:1 continues after the death of Ehud, not Shamgar. So it might very well be that Shamgar's actions occurred within the period of Ehud's judgeship. The next section shows that he was a contemporary of Barak and Deborah and so may have appeared about the same time that the Philistines were beginning to settle in the coastal plain. Thus, Deborah and Barak are viewed as following Ehud, not Shamgar. We will look at Deborah and Barak in our next session.

What we witness in Israel in the time of Judges is not so different from where we see the church today. To the degree that the church resorts to doing church like the world does business, the church, like Israel, is hard-pressed to godly men to lead the church. The church must never forget the lesson Israel, that God is under no obligation to those claim His name but act like Canaanites.